

I Kept Talking to My Rapists

So many of us berate ourselves over the question “Why did I not have the right response?” By Jeannie Vanasco



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When people ask me why I never reported my rapists, I reply: “It was just easiest for me to pretend it didn’t happen,” “I didn’t want to be a victim,” “I was embarrassed,” “I was scared.” These same explanations appear in the testimonies of the women who say that the disgraced movie producer Harvey Weinstein sexually assaulted them.

As I read the coverage of Weinstein’s trial, I saw how his defense attorneys perpetuated common misconceptions about how women *should* respond to assault. “A true rape victim,” they said, certainly wouldn’t continue speaking with her rapist. But I did. Most sexual-assault victims don’t report their perpetrators—I didn’t—so the myriad ways that women respond are not usually made public. So many of us berate ourselves over the question “Why did I not have the right response?”

Even though more than 90 women have publicly said that Weinstein sexually harassed and abused them, he stood trial in New York for allegedly raping only two women: Miriam Haley, a former production

assistant, and Jessica Mann, an aspiring actor. (New York's statute of limitations bars most of the women from pressing charges.) Haley says he raped her in 2006; Mann says he raped her twice in 2013. Yesterday, the jury found Weinstein guilty of a felony sex crime and rape in the third degree. He now faces a prison sentence of five to 29 years.

During the trial, Weinstein's defense built most of its case around the fact that Haley and Mann maintained contact with the producer after he raped them. His attorneys fished through email and text messages between Weinstein and the women, dredging up supposedly compromising exchanges. Two years after the attack, Haley signed an email to him "Lots of Love." She also texted him: "Hi! Just wondering if u have any news on whether Harvey will have time to see me before he leaves? X Miriam." Mann also sent messages to Weinstein, such as, "I appreciate all you do for me." His attorneys held up each message as if it undoubtedly proved his innocence. In a statement to the judge, the defense described the exchanges as "so unlike what one would expect to be communications between a true rape victim and her alleged rapist."

However, as the forensic psychiatrist Barbara Ziv testified for the prosecution, sexual-assault victims "almost always" return to their

assailants. “Most individuals think, *I can put it behind me; I can move on with my life and forget about what happened to me. I don’t want it to get worse. I don’t want this person who sexually assaulted me to ruin my friendships or put my job in jeopardy,*” she explained.

Most victims know their abusers. According to RAINN, eight out of 10 rapes are committed by someone the victim knows. Not surprisingly, a woman reacts differently during and after a sexual assault perpetrated by an acquaintance, a friend, a colleague, a boss, or a family member than she would to one perpetrated by a stranger. Sometimes, that reaction may even seem unusual. Each time I was raped, I knew the perpetrator. When a stranger tried to sexually assault me, I fought him off, but when friends raped me, I froze.

The first time, I was 19 years old. The friend—I’ll call him Mark—carried me, passed out, into his basement room and raped me. He apologized two or three days later, and I quickly said something like, “Oh, it’s fine. Everybody makes mistakes.” I pushed the rape aside, or tried to. I told myself, *Well, he’d been drinking; I’d been drinking. Is it worth ending a friendship of five years over one mistake?* Because of this rationale, I allowed myself to see him a few times after the rape. I felt I had to see him. I didn’t know how to tell our friends that I couldn’t spend time with them if Mark was there.

What if they didn't believe me? What if they blamed me? Eventually, I let those friendships go. It seemed easier than trying to explain what had happened.

Sometimes a sexual-assault victim can't believe, or acknowledge, that she was assaulted. Haley said that she didn't initially consider Weinstein's actions an assault, because she "didn't physically resist." She said, "I felt like an idiot, and I felt numb."

I also didn't physically resist Mark. I also felt like an idiot. I also felt numb. I also then wondered whether Mark's actions counted as sexual assault. Then, in my 20s, I was raped by a co-worker, someone I also considered a friend. Pretending it never happened allowed me to return to the office the next day. Seeing this co-worker afterward, I felt some brief sense of control. If I could work with this man, then surely I could get past the rape.

After Weinstein allegedly raped Mann, she testified that she "entered into what I thought was going to be a real relationship with him—and it was extremely degrading from that point on." Weinstein's attorneys pointed to this as further proof that he couldn't have possibly raped her. Dating her attacker may give a survivor some sense of power. If you've ever laughed despite feeling profound grief, then you

understand that sometimes our actions and feelings don't predictably align.

After 14 years of silence between Mark and me, I interviewed him for a book I was writing. Talking with him again all these years later—shaping the narrative—was my way of taking control. He explained he knew that what he was doing that night was wrong while he was doing it, but he did it anyway. “It was a huge betrayal,” he said. “I’ve felt terrible about it for however many years now. I have to admit I was really surprised to hear from you. I kind of assumed I never would again.”

Even all these years later, I tried to accommodate him. While transcribing the audio of our conversations, I noticed that I often handed the power back to him, telling him, “So this is how I remember the event, but correct me if you have a different memory.” Early in our conversation, I even comforted him, saying, “I hope you know that I don’t hate you, or anything like that,” “I hope it’s in some way helpful for you to know that I genuinely believe you’re a good guy,” and “I hope this is somewhat helpful for you to talk about.”

When I pointed this out to Mark on a later call, we both laughed at how deferential I could be. “It’s embarrassing,” I told him. “I didn’t

know I did it that much.” He called it “endearing.” I called it “absurd.” He and I sometimes even slipped into reminiscing about high school, as if the rape had never happened. It wasn’t hard to pretend that everything was okay. I had spent years trying to avoid thinking about what he did.

At Weinstein’s trial, I wasn’t surprised that his defense attorneys relied on these stereotypes about how women should react to an assault. But I did wonder whether his attorneys either had a low-grade understanding of human behavior or figured the jury did. Did they not know? Or did they know, but not care? Maybe they cared but told themselves they were just doing their job, protecting the sanctity of due process. And then I heard his lawyer Donna Rotunno on *The New York Times*’ podcast *The Daily*. Megan Twohey, one of the *Times* journalists who broke the story about Weinstein’s pattern of abuse, interviewed Rotunno six days after the trial started.

As the interview approached the end, Twohey said she had one more question: Had Rotunno ever been sexually assaulted? Rotunno replied, “I have not.” There was a pause. The interview sounded like it was over. And then Rotunno added, “Because I would never put myself in that position.”

She continued, “I’ve always made choices from college age on where I never drank too much, I never went home with someone I didn’t know, I just never put myself in any vulnerable circumstance. Ever.”

I knew then that his defense believed that there was a right and wrong way for an assault to unfold. I am not ashamed that I was drunk when I was raped, but I am livid that, as a woman who has gotten drunk, I am made to feel as if I deserved to be raped. Or that because I talked to my rapists after the rapes, that means I’d consented to sex with them.

In her closing arguments for the prosecution, Joan Illuzzi, an assistant district attorney, smartly used the defense’s point—that the women stayed in touch with Weinstein—against Weinstein. “He made sure he had contact with the people he was worried about,” Illuzzi said, adding, “That’s the mark of a predator.”

Like the prosecution, we need to focus on a perpetrator’s actions instead of immediately searching for weaknesses in a victim’s account.

We need to destigmatize victimhood and expand our notions of how a victim can think and feel and react.

We need to recognize that it's complicated.

About the Author

[Jeannie Vanasco](#) is the author of *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* and *The Glass Eye*.